



The St. Louis River AOC includes the lower 39 river miles of the St. Louis River and its respective watershed, the Nemadji River watershed, and a portion of western Lake Superior.

Great Lakes rivers and harbors that have been most severely affected by pollution and habitat loss are considered “Areas of Concern,” or AOCs. Designated in 1987 as part of an international agreement between the U.S. and Canada known as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, these geographically-defined sites need special attention. This fact sheet highlights some of the progress that partners in Wisconsin and Minnesota have made toward removing the St. Louis River from the list of AOCs.

The St. Louis River Great Lakes Area of Concern

Early explorers of the St. Louis River described a rugged land of rocky outcroppings, forests, wetlands and wild rice. Over time, this pristine environment became an important area for commerce and industry. The river was reshaped by dams and degraded by mining, logging, saw milling and manufacturing and eventually became one of Wisconsin’s most polluted waterways.



Dragon boat races at Barker’s Island
Photo by Phillip Schwartz



Juvenile sturgeon caught in 2014
Photo by Minnesota DNR



Large freighter in Fraser Shipyard
Photo by Scott Pearson

AOC Accomplishments

The Hog Island Newton Creek Great Lakes Legacy Act sediment cleanup was completed in 2005; during the final phase, 44,000 cubic yards of petroleum-contaminated sediment and soil was removed. Over fifty percent of the material was beneficially reused as grading or capping material at the landfill. University Wisconsin-Lake Superior Research Institute partnered with Douglas County to complete habitat restoration in 2010 including control of invasive species, installation of aquatic habitat structures, riparian restoration, shoreline buffer restoration, wetland restoration, and wild rice planting.

Lake Sturgeon in the St. Louis River are making a comeback thanks to many years of stocking and a spawning habitat enhancement project led by the Minnesota DNR and Nature Conservancy in 2009. Evidence of natural reproduction has been observed with the capture of sturgeon fry at the spawning site in 2011 and 2013. A juvenile sturgeon around 7 years old was surveyed in 2014, and is believed to be naturally reproduced from the estuary. This is an encouraging sign for the sturgeon population. Additional spawning habitat enhancement and shoreline softening at Chambers Grove Park is scheduled for 2015.

Contaminated sediment sites in WI at Howards Bay and Crawford Creek are moving toward cleanup. Remedial design and a feasibility study are being conducted using 2013 sampling data at Howards Bay and additional sediment characterization took place in 2014 at Crawford Creek. Cleanup of these sites is anticipated to begin in the next few years.

Strong partnerships between federal, state, and local agencies, the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and nonprofit organizations have contributed to these accomplishments and many others.

Highlights from the St. Louis River Area of Concern

St. Louis River Area of Concern Implementation Framework: Roadmap to Delisting (Remedial Action Plan Update)

July 15, 2013



2013 Remedial Action Plan: Roadmap to Delisting

The Roadmap to Delisting the St. Louis River AOC was rolled out on July 15, 2013, following an intensive three-year planning process involving numerous AOC partners and stakeholders. The “Remedial Action Plan” or RAP outlines the projects necessary to remove all of the impairments by the year 2025. The plan includes details about the status of each of the nine impairments, as well as specific project cost estimates and timelines. With strong partnerships and investments by federal agencies through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative implementation has already begun. The plan will be updated yearly and can be viewed by visiting <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/greatlakes/st.louis.html> under the Plans tab.



Clough Island

Clough Island and two adjacent small, unnamed, islands were acquired by The Nature Conservancy in 2010. Ownership and management responsibility were transferred to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 2011. This 350 acre island is the largest island in the St. Louis River Estuary and was a farmstead for many years. The island's unique forest and wetland habitats are being enhanced through a USFWS Coastal Wetland Protection & Restoration Grant. Through this funding, the WDNR and partners are leading projects which include aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem condition assessments, garbage cleanup, the development and installation of an interpretive sign and habitat restoration. Over 6,000 conifer seedlings have been planted and 105 acres have been treated for invasive plant species so far. An additional 81 acres is planned to be treated in 2015.



Aesthetics BUI

The first BUI removal in the St. Louis River AOC was approved by the U. S. EPA on August 14, 2014. The BUI removal package outlines the many improvements to the aesthetic quality of the river over the past 30 years as well as recent actions taken to alleviate the aesthetic impairments. This is an important first step in the roadmap to delisting the St. Louis River AOC by 2025. The removal package can be viewed at <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/greatlakes/st.louis.html> under the Impairments tab.



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